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# Romantic Refractions: Light Effects in Ruskin's Poetry

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## Keywords

Ruskin, light, materiality, orientalism, religion, vision

## Abstract

The poetry of John Ruskin – which amounts to a surprisingly large body of work, mostly written in the 1830s and 1840s – reveals the stirrings of the moral perceptual attitude that would emerge with such distinctive force in *Modern Painters*, yet one guided by the influences of Keats, Shelley and Byron as much as the natural theology of Wordsworth (despite *Modern Painters* taking its epigraph from *The Excursion*). While in some respects a poetry of post-Romantic transition, Ruskin's work also demonstrates a consistent interest in light – in ways that affirm its imaginative commerce with second-generation Romanticism – while exploring light's physical properties and dynamic environmental effects. Focusing in particular on his prize-winning poem 'Salsette and Elephanta' (1839), I suggest that Ruskin's poems establish possibilities that reach beyond merely received metaphorical meanings (light as redemptive telos and/or abstract condition of the visible) and instead look forward to the overdetermined stylisations typical of his mature prose works.

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On 12 June 1839, the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford was full to capacity: Wordsworth, on the cusp of seventy, was to receive an honorary doctorate from the University. Among the large gathering for Commemoration in Sir Christopher Wren's ceremonial hall were John Keble – delivering, as Professor of Poetry, the Creweian Oration, in which he would memorably praise the poet's affinity with the poor<sup>1</sup> – and also Thomas Arnold, visiting Oxford expressly to see Wordsworth honoured, who later reflected that it was 'striking to witness the thunders of applause, repeated over and over again, with which he was greeted, by Undergraduates and Masters of Arts alike'.<sup>2</sup> Also there that day, among this rousing throng, was a third notable figure, John Ruskin, who, at twenty years old and a gentleman-commoner at Christ Church, was attending to have his own poetic ambitions recognised. After two failed attempts, Ruskin had won the Newdigate Prize. His poem 'Salsette and Elephanta' had beaten the entry of a fellow undergraduate poet, Arthur Hugh Clough, who took second place, and victory meant reciting the poem publicly during Commemoration with the added honour of being handed the prize by Wordsworth himself. Here, on this grand stage, Ruskin was to be applauded for poetic achievement alongside the author of *The Excursion*, a poem that would supply the epigraph to all five volumes of *Modern Painters* (1843-60).<sup>3</sup>

What might this scene reveal? Superficially, its intergenerational Romantic dynamics invite the thought of handover and transfer – the proffering of a Wordsworthian legacy and the emergence of an aesthetic heir in the figure of Ruskin, whose literary apprenticeship it seems to solemnise. But the ramifications are rather more subtly configured. Crystallised in ceremony, the scene suggests the negotiations of a culture in post-Romantic transition, exemplified by an effort to sculpt the image of Victorian Wordsworth, especially the claim on him from Keble and the Oxford Movement.<sup>4</sup> It also anticipates Ruskin's appearance in the same room over three decades later, on 8 February 1870, when he gave his inaugural lecture as Oxford's first Slade Professor of Fine Art, though by then Ruskin had evolved into a moral

critic with little directly to say about poetry or poets.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, what really unites Ruskin and Wordsworth here is not the motif of inheritance so much as that of poetic exhaustion: neither man had a creatively significant poem ahead of him, no real ripening of poetic talent to come, such that their 1839 meeting speaks quietly of endings rather than continuities. Measured by acclaim, Ruskin's Newdigate success marked the summit of his poetic career, despite the ample evidence of craft and industry found in his surprisingly large body of published poems.<sup>6</sup>

Like many of them, the recited poem 'Salsette and Elephanta' is revealing for its sustained interest in the dynamics of light. Written in the nascent phase of Ruskin's literary career, it already discloses an aesthetic preoccupation with the way light behaves as an agent of visibility and, to adapt a phrase from *Modern Painters I*, an illustrator of nature.<sup>7</sup> The same may be said of many of Ruskin's poems, as I will explore here. Light effects of different kinds, serving distinct poetic ends, can be discerned with remarkable regularity across his works, including in his poetic juvenilia, in ways that refract, as it were, the influence of second-generation Romantic poets more noticeably than that of Wordsworth. As in *Modern Painters*, Ruskin's interest lies not just in the scenic mood conferred by a light source and its play upon objects, but also in the eye's subtle attentional shifts that make it possible to register light and atmosphere as observable objects in themselves, that is to say, as the ends rather than the means of perceptual action. Several of Ruskin's works develop this serious concern with the materiality of light. The opening lines of 'Salsette and Elephanta', for example, set up a vividly expectant twilight:

'Tis eve—and o'er the face of parting day  
Quick smiles of summer lightning flit and play;  
In pulses of broad light, less seen than felt,

They mix in heaven, and on the mountains melt;  
Their silent transport fills the exulting air—  
'Tis eve, and where is evening half so fair?<sup>8</sup> (1-6)

An orientalist purpose may underwrite this evocative dusk – Salsette and Elephanta being two islands close to Bombay, both known for elaborate caves dating from Indian antiquity, which Ruskin had learned about from European sources such as the travel writing of James Silk Buckingham – but such manifest exoticising draws on a material language of light that begins to anticipate the Ruskin who became so well practised in observing sunsets, cloud forms, and skies closer to home.<sup>9</sup> The lines carefully contrast exhausted day with revitalising bursts of lightning, these ‘pulses of broad light’ supplying a panorama of visual energy that appears to be ‘felt’ as much as seen. Their electric dynamism, mixing, melting, and transporting in the air, guides the poem towards the real subject of its narrative (the carvings of Hindu gods, rites, and myths seen nocturnally in the caves) while looking forward to its final movement which welcomes a different kind of light to the islands, namely the redemptive light of eventual Christianisation.

In his memoir *Praeterita* (1885-89) Ruskin describes abandoning poetry in 1845, still well under the age of thirty, with a small clutch of poems coming from his Continental tour that summer, ‘the last serious exertions of my poetical powers’ (xxxv. 344). Typical of this work of early retirement is ‘Mont Blanc Revisited’, which similarly opens with an emphatic twilight scene, framed by some conventional apostrophising:

OH, mount beloved! mine eyes again  
Behold the twilight’s sanguine stain  
Along thy peaks expire.

Oh, mount beloved! thy frontier waste

I seek with a religious haste,

And reverent desire.<sup>10</sup> (1-6)

Ruskin is revisiting here his own earlier poem 'Mont Blanc', in which he saw the mountain's dark grandeur as disclosing the mystery of divine love, as well as remembering Shelley's poem of 1817. The conventional task of glorifying Alpine height and space is allowed to develop into a less obvious sentiment as the poem proceeds, with the speaker confronting his sense that 'all God's love can scarcely win / One soul from taking pride in sin' (28-29) and then supplanting it with a 'milder thought' (37) that forgiving others' sins must trump 'jealousy for Thee' (42). This movement offers a more daringly humanistic variation on the reverential theme of Ruskin's original poem: as for Shelley, Mont Blanc now expresses the precariousness as well as the power of the imaginative self and brings the poem to a moment of ethical insight rather than to the heights of egotistical sublimity or pious affirmation. Some self-conscious phrase-making, tied to purposeful rhymes, helps to upholster a workmanlike *rime couée* ghosted by the spectre of common metre, very much illustrating Ruskin's technical application. Moreover, the poem's first dusky light effect – the prospect of 'twilight's sanguine stain' – unifies the poem's interests, being a vast sunset hued in the colour of Christ's blood and connected to the poem's final discovery of sympathetic feeling, in which ultimately the poet learns to redirect his attention from the heavenly realm towards the world of lived ethical interaction. However sacred, this sanguine light is the light of a sky that frames an all-too-human world, not one promising 'The light of Heaven hereafter, when the strife / Of wandering stars, that rules this night of life, / Dies in the dawning of Eternity', as Ruskin put it in his original 'Mont Blanc' poem (25-27).<sup>11</sup>

‘Salsette and Elephanta’, while less sophisticated in the pattern it traces, partakes in similar considerations of light. As in almost all of Ruskin’s work, light acquires meaning as its denotation flits restlessly between the figurative and the literal, the immaterial and the physical. It is both a condition of perception and a perceptual object – a phenomenon of beams, pulses, shafts, waves, radiance, prisms, reflections, rainbows, starlight. Light effects of both kinds are central to the unfolding Romantic orientalism of ‘Salsette and Elephanta’. Consisting of 287 lines of rolling heroic couplets, the poem presents an imagined geography of the two Indian islands and their ancient sculpted rock caves, moving from their craggy topography to the grotesque allure of their carved gods and priests, who in a ‘mingled dream’ (241) appear to gain animated life, before dawn arrives to close the poem with the coming ‘purer light’ (252) of the ‘Incarnate God’ (287). Until that point, ‘Wild superstition’s visionary power / Still rules and fills the spirit of the hour’ (35-36). The cavernous interiors lend Ruskin a subject that married his early aspirations to be a geologist and a poet, though the reputation of these sites as places of artistic significance and sublimity was well established by the 1780s. One British traveller to Salsette and Elephanta had described being ‘filled with new wonder at every step: palaces, statues, giants, monsters, and deities, seemed as if starting up from the bowels of the earth to open day... a scene more like enchantment than reality.’<sup>12</sup> Ruskin’s poem imitates that perspective uncannily faithfully, in a narrative organised around a sequence of beguiling moments of illumination.

First, the darkling mood of the oriental nocturne operates as a dim backcloth for the thrill of luminous spectacle. Elephanta is first invoked with a simile linking it to the mind’s unconscious: ‘dark Isle! whose shadow on the sea / Lies like the gloom that mocks our memory’ (65-66). In this antique land, gathering shadow and shade invigorate life. Likewise, Salsette, a place ‘girt with gloom’ (51), quickly falls into superstitious half-lit routines:

The Indian maiden, through the scented grove,  
Seeks the dim shore, and lights the lamp of love;  
The pious peasant, awe-struck and alone,  
With radiant garland crowns the purple stone,  
And shrinks, returning through the starlit glade,  
When breezes stir the peepul's sacred shade (37-42)

Unlike the Indian maiden of Keats's *Endymion*, which serves, as Nigel Leask has noted, as a 'critique and revision' of the dream of the 'veiled maid' in Shelley's *Alastor*, Ruskin's feminine figure remains mute, without song, and barely eroticised.<sup>13</sup> The scene's sensuous gloom rather recalls the embowered paganist imagery in Keats's 'Ode to Psyche' (groves, shrines, incense), while being less consciously aware of locating, or building, such sacred space out of the mind's own 'shadowy thought', as Keats's poem does.<sup>14</sup> Ruskin's maiden's solemn ritual gesture of rekindling sacred light in the oriental grove is swiftly followed by another indexical sight, this time a tree-worshipping peasant, who appears primarily for his or her typicality. The maiden is framed by lamplight, while the peasant's 'radiant' floral offering at the foot of the tree is glimpsed by starlight, which creates a 'sacred shade' of its own. Ruskin's notes to the poem show that he knew this to be a superstitious light effect, said in Hinduism to attract the dead.<sup>15</sup> If seemingly unthreatening at this point in the poem, these two figures usher in a dreamlike state that leads to 'Night's fitful visions' (246) of the caves' carvings of 'ghastly idols' (60). Wonderment and awe will blend, at the poem's climax, with night terror. According to one of Ruskin's sources on Indian antiquity, the orientalist Thomas Maurice, certain details in the excavated spaces were 'inexpressibly savage and terrible'.<sup>16</sup> Elephanta, moreover, was particularly known by scholars and travellers for its graphic



eroticism, notably the prominent erect phallus of the main sculpted god Siva, though Ruskin (like Clough in his poem on the subject) steers wholesomely clear of it.<sup>17</sup>

A second kind of light presides over the middle sections of the poem and creates visual or mental disturbance. This is the exotic moonlight of visionary excess which plays on the rocky surfaces of the islands' romantic caverns. The 'mountain-gate' of Elephanta 'gleams' (84) in reflected lunar light, creating an architectural optical illusion: 'The keen moon's crescent lights thy sacred cave; / And moving beams confuse, with shadowy change, / Thy columns' massive might' (86-88). This deceiving light merges object, shadow, and reflection. Ruskin again draws attention to its material dynamics: the moonbeams have 'flooding lustre' (100) as they 'fling' their 'uncertain shade' (162). The same moonlight then partially reveals a frieze of sculpted forms:

New forms of fear, by every touch displayed,  
Gleam, pale and passioned, through the dreadful shade,  
In wreathed groups of dim, distorted life,  
In ghastly calmness, or tremendous strife;  
While glaring eye and grasping hand attest  
The mocked emotion of the marble breast.  
Thus, in the fevered dream of restless pain,  
Incumbent horror broods upon the brain;  
Through mists of blood colossal shapes arise,  
Stretch their stiff limbs, and roll their rayless eyes. (101-110)

The 'touch' suggested here may describe the aesthetic touch of the ancient sculptor's chisel, something that Ruskin later obliquely references in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53) when

distinguishing between the grotesque of Venetian gothic and ‘the barbarous grotesque of mere savageness, as seen in the work of the Hindoo and other Indian nations’ (xi. 187). But this touch could belong to the poet who feels his way along the carved rock-cave, seeing with his hands. Ruskin’s imagined participation in these scenes, until now only implicit and aerial, suddenly seems physically located in the position of the European traveller oppressed by an exotic subterranean chasm, his feverish brain struggling to gain a satisfactory sensory purchase on the faces and limbs of the depicted figures. A treacherous, ‘uncertain’ light has unhinged the poet’s mind:

Yet fancy, floating on the uncertain light,  
Fills with her crowded dreams the course of night;  
At her will wild aetherial forms appear,  
And sounds, long silent, strike the startled ear (166-69)

Thus opens the poem’s long fanciful climax, centring on the god Mithra and his robed priests, votaries, and massed Dewtahs (winged angels), who march to a maddening ‘choral chaunt’ (227) in the act of initiating some seemingly sacrificial rite – a passage that might be read as an orientalist pastiche of the woodland procession of damsels and shepherds in Book 1 of Keats’s *Endymion* (‘there glimmered light / Fair faces and a rush of garments white’).<sup>18</sup>

Emulating Keatsian ekphrasis, the bodies depicted in the frieze are ‘frozen into everlasting trance’ (143) but brought out of their eternal suspension by the poem as its narrative imaginatively and dizzyingly enters their world. A torchlit procession towards the ‘undying lamps’ of an altar conjures strange new light as ‘the fretted columns glow’ (173) along the caves’ walls, beaming upwards into the night sky (an azure-coloured ceiling) in the form of ‘entrancing light’ (177). Following his sources, Ruskin takes this visionary company

to be worshippers of the sun, as ‘pious frenzy flashes from their eyes’ (187) and about them ‘rise / Deep echoes from the conch of sacrifice’ (211). The poem draws on a symbolism of gold and flame which Ruskin would have encountered in Thomas Maurice’s description of Salsette and Elephanta, which records that ‘in [these subterranean recesses] was practised the most ancient superstition known to have flourished in Hindostan, and that superstition has been demonstrated to have been the worship of the SOLAR ORB and of FIRE’.<sup>19</sup> What Ruskin fails to absorb from Maurice is further evidence that such solar superstition was united with early Hindu astronomy and scientific culture.<sup>20</sup> Others, too, such as James Mill in his widely known *History of British India* (1817), read the islands not simply as sites of mystery but rather as expressions of major aesthetic achievement. For Mill, the cave of Elephanta, ‘from its magnitude, has given birth to the supposition of high civilization among the Hindoos’.<sup>21</sup> Cave temples on both islands, most likely constructed in the seventh or eighth century, were remarkable hewn structures which survived later Muslim iconoclasm, ‘less statements of power than statements of faith’, as the historian Romila Thapar puts it.<sup>22</sup> Yet in Ruskin’s visionary sequence, the carvings of the Hindu pantheon and ‘sacred cohorts’ (230) are unsubtly primitivised, calculatedly fashioned as the macabre prelude to the arrival of Ruskin’s redeeming God at the end of the narrative, who will ‘dart / His beams through the caverns of the heart’ (249) and ‘vindicate the temple for His own’ (251).

If it is difficult to gauge Ruskin’s poetic influences precisely, the neoclassicism of the Newdigate judges goes some way to explaining the formal and ideological shape of ‘Salsette and Elephanta’. Clough’s rival poem of that title, for example, similarly looks to demonstrate its metrical dexterity using the heroic couplet, in Augustan fashion, and ends by picturing the civilising illumination of a coming dawn (‘Till Earthly Night far spent already end / And the full orb in cloudless light ascend’).<sup>23</sup> But the differences between them are more revealing. As Evelyn Greenberger has claimed, Clough’s most direct debt is to Wordsworth, as can be

seen in his poem's allusive nods to 'Resolution and Independence' and the Immortality Ode, and the central poetic image of his 'Salsette and Elephanta' is that of water.<sup>24</sup> For Ruskin, as I have been suggesting, the impetus comes instead from his varied imagery of light. No equivalent atmospherics of Eastern light exist in Clough's poem. And, to make a further qualification, Ruskin's poetic apprenticeship in the mid-1830s was shaped by his reading of more recent poets than Dryden or Pope, especially Byron. 'A Scythian Banquet Song', for example, written by Ruskin while at Oxford in the spring of 1838, takes a Herodotean theme and bends it in direct imitation of *The Giaour*. He also 'rejoiced' in *Don Juan* and declared Byron 'my master in verse, as Turner in colour' (xxxv. 144). Shelley, too, helped widen Ruskin's poetic horizons – another Romantic poet drawn to Eastern settings and vital to what Andrew Warren calls the period's fashionable 'flood of interest in the Orient'.<sup>25</sup> Without fully grasping it, Ruskin had read *The Revolt of Islam* some three years before writing 'Salsette and Elephanta', alongside works such as *Prometheus Unbound*, 'The Sensitive Plant' and *Epipsychidion*. 'I took a good deal of harm from *him*' (xxxv. 183), *Praeterita* recalls coyly in reference to Shelley, in ironic contrast to Byron.

To be sure, Ruskin's poetic curiosity about light predates his reading of these poets. A simple verse on the rainbow, composed at the age of seven, shows the stirrings of what would turn into his cultivation of *looking* as a moral, aesthetic and scientific practice:

But those that do not know about that light  
 Reflect not on it; and in all that light,  
 Not one of all the colours do they know.<sup>26</sup>

Even this fragment of juvenilia insists that knowing requires refined perception: those who fail to observe properly cannot distinguish natural form and detail, in this instance the subtle

prismatic effects of rainbow light. This Ruskinian theme receives extended treatment in *Modern Painters*, memorably encoded in the third volume's axiom, 'To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion,—all in one' (v. 333). But the prominent language of luminosity in so many of Ruskin's poems, not least 'Salsette and Elephanta', seems to bear the influence of second-generation Romantic poets. Shelley's *Epipsychidion* savours, notably, the spectacular play of light rays in and off refracting bodies and reflective planes:

'tis like thy light.

Imagination! which from earth and sky,  
And from the depths of human fantasy,  
As from a thousand prisms and mirrors, fills  
The Universe with glorious beams, and kills  
Error, the worm, with many a sun-like arrow  
Of its reverberated lightning.<sup>27</sup>

Shelley's figuration of the imagination's radiant energy and power draws on the physical language of light, on its beams, reverberating lightning, and arrow-like direction (or one might say its rectilinear movement). He finds a way of apprehending its material force while surpassing the limits of scientific understanding.

Ruskin shared this enjoyment of light in motion – its beautiful diffusion across physical space, as in 'the rays that bless, / They come, they come' ('Salsette and Elephanta', 245-46), which heralds Mithra's overthrow – at a time when the nature and properties of light were strenuously debated. The Newtonian corpuscular model of light, which argues that it moves from a luminous body in the form of tiny particles, was challenged in the early nineteenth century by Thomas Young's wave theory, or undulation theory, which predicated

the substance of ether as a neutral medium or container through which light waves could travel. Throughout the subsequent century, the scientific language of light would remain vexed, contested, and often suggestively metaphorical. As the scientist John Tyndall summed up in 1870, ‘How... are we to lay hold of the physical basis of light, since, like that of life itself, it lies entirely without the domain of the senses?’<sup>28</sup> Ruskin’s most direct response to this quintessential enquiry, and to the materialism of writers like Tyndall especially, appears in *The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* (1884) where he foams and blusters at the scientists’ hopelessly illogical models: ‘when all undulation known to us presumes weight, and all vibration, impact,—the undulating theory of light is proposed to you concerning a medium [i.e. ether] which you can neither weigh nor touch!’ (xxxiv. 26). Not only was ether as a conduit for light a nonsensical hypothesis, hovering between observation and fantasy, but light and sound ‘must remain, wholly inexplicable, whatever manner of force, pulse, or palpitation may be instrumental in producing them’ (xxxiv. 26-27).

Yet his poems attend repeatedly to light’s materiality. One characteristic motif, for instance, is the image of phosphoric illumination. On the island of Elephanta, ‘sapphire tints of phosphor lightning fall / O’er the broad pillar and the sculptured wall’ (97-98). Virtually identical phrasing had appeared in his combative ‘Reply to “Blackwood’s” Criticism of Turner’ (1836), in which he expounds at length on the ‘beauty of uncertain light’ in Turner’s painting *Juliet and her Nurse*, noticing its interplay of shadow, light, and colour: ‘[Turner’s mists] move and mingle among the pale stars, and rise up into the brightness of the illimitable heaven, whose soft, sad blue eye gazes down into the deep waters of the sea for ever,—that sea whose motionless and silent transparency is beaming with phosphor light, that emanates out of its sapphire serenity like bright dreams breathed into the spirit of a deep sleep’ (iii. 638-39). The image of mirrored sea and sky, tinged with this highly particular hue, is repeated in a poem of 1837, ‘A Tour Through France’, when Ruskin pictures a barely

darkened night: ‘So softly with the air was starlight blended, / Like the sea’s phosphor lustre, coldly bright’.<sup>29</sup> The image brings with it a kind of ample poetic strangeness, the sense of light being noticed, as the special quality of the nocturnal glare draws the eye to it as a perceptual object. Similarly, it appears in ‘The Crystal-Hunter’ (1834):

Lo! gleams of pale, phosphoric light  
Flashed broad and wavy, clear and bright;  
Red, purple, blue,—the pointed flame  
From many a crystal cavern came. (72-75)

The phosphor-glow, curiously ‘wavy’, thus illuminates another Romantic cavern, though at this moment what holds the poem’s interest is not so much the secrecy of the Alpine cave as the spectacular iridescence it produces.

In a post-Oxford poem, ‘The Departed Light’, first published in the annual *Friendship’s Offering* in 1841, Ruskin’s concern extends beyond light’s relation to memory to the thought of its travel in time and space. Written to accompany a plate of an engraving entitled ‘View in the Campagna, near Rome’, the poem comprised two sonnets ‘Siamesed together’, as Ruskin explained, which embellish the pastoral prospect of a columned temple, water and mountains.<sup>30</sup> Like ‘Salsette and Elephanta’, ‘The Departed Light’ imagines earlier forms of worship, the rituals ‘Of those who worshipped here, whose steps have past / To silence—leaving o’er the waters cast / The light of their religion’ (13-15). It is replete with the tints and hues of an Italianate idyll, where ‘myrtles and white olives interweave / Their cool, grey shadows with the azure gleam / Of noontide’ (3-5). Azure is a favourite shade in Ruskin’s poetry, and thoroughly Shelleyan in its associations with serenity and recovery: his skies, lakes and hills are all frequently bathed in this intensely painterly tone.<sup>31</sup> The Indian

sky in 'Salsette and Elephanta' 'Extends the azure of its canopy' (175), for example, in an echo of one of several azure details in *Prometheus Unbound*, when Asia instructs Panthea to behold the morning sky's 'azure waves which burst in silver light' revealing 'Some Indian vale'.<sup>32</sup> Less exotic, though no less relished, is the rendering of cloud and sky in 'To Adèle' (1840), where it is pointedly repeated in the space of three lines:

As the swift throb of morning breaks  
Through the thin rain-cloud's folded flakes;  
Even as, that hour, it beamed above  
The azure of the expanded plains,  
And filled the heaven with light, like love,  
And kindled through its azure veins,  
As the keen joy through mine<sup>33</sup> (19-25)

A double Romantic debt takes place here in the phrase 'azure veins', which establishes a dialogue with both Shelley's *Queen Mab* and Keats's *Lamia*.<sup>34</sup> At the close of Keats's poem, a vexed Lycius gazes into Lamia's face, 'where now no azure vein / Wandered on fair-spaced temples'.<sup>35</sup> Ruskin draws on Keats's anatomical usage to pose a correspondence between the appearance of veins of light and the 'keen joy' in his own bodily veins of blood. In 'The Departed Light', the 'azure gleam' of water mixes with the cool shadows of myrtle and olive while vertical 'shafts of light' (6) reflected by the temple's columns rhythmically interrupt its form.

And yet, in the end, 'The Departed Light' cannot recover the light of this vanished world. The connections it establishes between the lingering of echoed voices, ripples on the surface of the water, and the rays of the sun suggestively embrace the similar way in which



sound and light travel through space (and time). Halfway through the poem, a ‘gentle dame’ appears, whose ‘waves of ceaseless song’ energise the air:

she would awake  
The lulled air with her kindling thoughts, and leave  
Her voice’s echo on the listening lake;  
The quenched rays of her beauty would deceive  
Its depths into quick joy. Hill, wave, and brake  
Grew living as she moved (18-23)

Her luminous energy ripples out over the watery surfaces, in a kind of wave pattern akin to the vibration of air caused by her rapturous song. Ruskin’s language carries the subtle suggestion of light’s materialisation in a defined ecological space, while at the same time shaping a mythic pastoral scene, though one now gone because the dame herself has departed: ‘But now—she is not there—at least, the chill / Hath passed upon her which no sun shall break’ (25-26). Her light has travelled elsewhere. It may be an early poem but Ruskin was evidently pleased with the phrase ‘departed light’, later recycling it in praise of one of Turner’s Swiss watercolours from 1845, which he described as ‘fading away into a mere dream of departing light’.<sup>36</sup>

There are, then, varied light effects in Ruskin’s poetry – half-light, shadow, shade, gleaming fires, dusky snow, starlight and moonlight, rays, beams, phosphor, watery waves – and the main poetic image in this underappreciated body of work is that of dynamic light. His Newdigate poem ‘Salsette and Elephanta’ helps to illustrate a range of concerns which includes the apprehension and close observation of particular light conditions, while being tied into larger narrative patterns of ideological and religious meaning. Light marks out the

field of perception itself, and the condition of bringing things forth, but also acquires a deep visual interest of its own. At one level, light and redemption cannot be separated in early Ruskin: William Holman Hunt's *The Light of the World* (1853-54) was, according to *Modern Painters III*, 'the most perfect instance of expressional purpose with technical power, which the world has yet produced' (v. 52). In *The Eagle's Nest* (1872), a series of lectures on art and science, Ruskin would declare that the metaphor of light as a divine gift was 'no metaphor—nor has it ever been so' (xxii. 204) and that the words in Matthew 6: 22 held literal truth: 'The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light'. His poems certainly figure light as a physical force as well as a redemptive telos. Its material motion and perceptible form are a constant stimulus. In these poems, one can detect the conscious stirrings of that moral perceptual attitude that would emerge with such distinctive force in *Modern Painters*, yet one guided by the influences of Keats, Shelley and Byron as much as by the natural theology of Wordsworth. And this might encourage us to rethink the significance of this aspect of Ruskin's career and larger oeuvre, for however derivative and constrained it can be, his best poetry deftly explores a meaningful aesthetics of light, in which the biblical, the scientific, and the imaginative are animatedly combined.

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<sup>1</sup> The most detailed treatment of the speech and its relation to the Oxford Movement can be found in Stephen Prickett's essay 'Keble's Creweian Oration of 1839: The Idea of a Christian University', in *John Keble in Context*, ed. Kirstie Blair (London, 2004), 19-32.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Arnold to Rev. G. Cornish, 6 July 1839. See Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold, D.D.* (2 vols, London, 1844), 2.160.

<sup>3</sup> Ruskin's epigraph slightly misquotes Book IV, lines 978-94 ('Accuse me not / Of arrogance...').

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<sup>4</sup> See Juliet Barker's *Wordsworth: A Life* (London, 2000), 705-6.

<sup>5</sup> His inaugural lecture explores painting, and to a lesser extent poetry, chiefly in the context of English character and national destiny, with Ruskin comparing Milton unfavourably to Hesiod and Shakespeare unfavourably to Dante (though noting the latter's imaginative power as a dramatist). Chaucer is described, not unambiguously, as 'the most perfect type of a true English mind in its best possible temper'. John Ruskin, *The Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (39 vols, London, 1903-12), xx. 29. Subsequent references to Ruskin's non-poetic works are taken from Ruskin's *Works* and will appear parenthetically after each quotation. Line references to his poems will be provided in the same way.

<sup>6</sup> Two editions of Ruskin's poems were published in his lifetime, in 1850 and 1891.

According to Wendell Stacy Johnson, 'The total quantity of this verse in print is just about as great as that published by Matthew Arnold and is greater than that of Gerard Manley Hopkins'. See 'Memory, Landscape, Love: John Ruskin's Poetry and Poetic Criticism,' *Victorian Poetry*, 19.1 (1981), 19-34.

<sup>7</sup> Ruskin describes the 'intensity of light by which nature illustrates her objects' (*Works*, iii. 164).

<sup>8</sup> *Works*, ii. 90-100.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, chapter one of Mary Jacobus's *Romantic Things: A Tree, a Rock, a Cloud* (Chicago, 2012), which discusses Ruskin's appreciation of cloudy skies alongside Constable, Turner, and John Clare.

<sup>10</sup> 'Mont Blanc Revisited', dated 9 June 1845 and composed in Geneva, was first published in Ruskin's *Poems* (1850). Along with two other poems, 'Basses Alpes' and 'The Glacier', Ruskin thought of it as marking the end of his poetic ambitions. See *Works*, ii. 233-35.

<sup>11</sup> *Works*, ii. 237.

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<sup>12</sup> Hector Macneil in a letter of 1783, quoted in Hermione De Almeida and George Gilpin, *The Indian Renaissance: British Romantic Art and the Prospect of India* (Aldershot, 2005), 50.

<sup>13</sup> Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire* (Cambridge, 1992), 125.

<sup>14</sup> ‘And there shall be for thee all soft delight / That shadowy thought can win.’ ‘Ode to Psyche’ (64-65). John Keats, *Selected Poems*, ed. John Barnard (London, 2007), 187-89.

<sup>15</sup> ‘The superstitious feeling of the Indian with respect to the peepul tree is well known,’ Ruskin explains. ‘Its shade is supposed to be loved and haunted by the dead.’ *Works*, ii. 92.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Maurice, *Indian Antiquities* (2 vols, London, 1806), ii. 153.

<sup>17</sup> See De Almeida and Gilpin, *The Indian Renaissance*, 50-53.

<sup>18</sup> John Keats, *Endymion: A Poetic Romance* (1818), I. 123-24. See Keats, *Selected Poems*, 41.

<sup>19</sup> Maurice, *Indian Antiquities*, ii. 137.

<sup>20</sup> ‘[T]he principles of that science [of astronomy] were once investigated and taught in these caverns with all the zeal that inspired its most enthusiastic votaries; while the worship of the solar orb of elementary fire was celebrated in them with those peculiar appendages of pomp and solemnity, which ever *accompanied*, and above all others, *distinguished*, that splendid superstition.’ (Maurice, *Indian Antiquities*, 138, original emphasis).

<sup>21</sup> James Mill, *The History of British India* (3 vols, London, 1817), i. 334.

<sup>22</sup> Romila Thapar, *Early India: From the Origins to A.D. 1300* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2004), 313.

<sup>23</sup> Evelyn Greenberger, “‘Salsette and Elephanta’: An Unpublished Poem by Clough”, *The Review of English Studies*, 20.79 (1969), 284-305. Greenberger’s article contains the full text of Clough’s Newdigate poem, plus commentary; the final couplet quoted here is from lines

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263-64. Greenberger makes the point that Ruskin had been advised to model his poem on Pope, and Clough's metre and diction suggest he received similar advice.

<sup>24</sup> For Clough, Greenberger writes, moving waters speak of the flow of time and history, while promising peace and purity: 'In their deeps are mysteries, and perhaps truths; in their motion and unfolding are excitement, and perhaps danger; in their stasis and tranquility is a seductive beauty, but a beauty intensified by its fragile instability' ("Salsette and Elephanta": An Unpublished Poem', 301).

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Warren, *The Orient and the Young Romantics* (Cambridge, 2014), 3.

<sup>26</sup> This unpublished work of 1826, one of Ruskin's earliest poems, appears only as a brief extract in the *Works* (ii. 254). Ruskin quotes it in *Praeterita*, however (*Works*, xxxv. 56).

<sup>27</sup> *Epipsychidion* (1821), lines 163-69. See Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford, 2003), 512-28.

<sup>28</sup> John Tyndall, *Essays on the Use and Limit of the Imagination in Science* (London, 1870), 16.

<sup>29</sup> From stanza 32 of the poem (*Works*, ii. 408).

<sup>30</sup> *Works*, ii. 205-206.

<sup>31</sup> For Harold Bloom, 'throughout Shelley's poetry azure or blue is the color of redemption, of happiness, of a peace achieved in the spirit'. Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking* (New Haven, 1959), 76.

<sup>32</sup> *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), II. iii. 21-22. See Shelley, *The Major Works*, 229-313.

<sup>33</sup> *Works*, 2. 110-113.

<sup>34</sup> In *Queen Mab*: 'those azure veins / Which steal like streams along a field of snow' (I. 14-15). See Shelley, *The Major Works*, 11.

<sup>35</sup> John Keats, *Lamia*, II. 272-3. See Keats, *Selected Poems*, 199-219.

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<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of the picture, *Fluelen: Morning (Looking Towards the Lake)*, and Ruskin's comment, see Scott Wilcox, *Victorian Landscape Watercolours* (New York, 1992), 73.